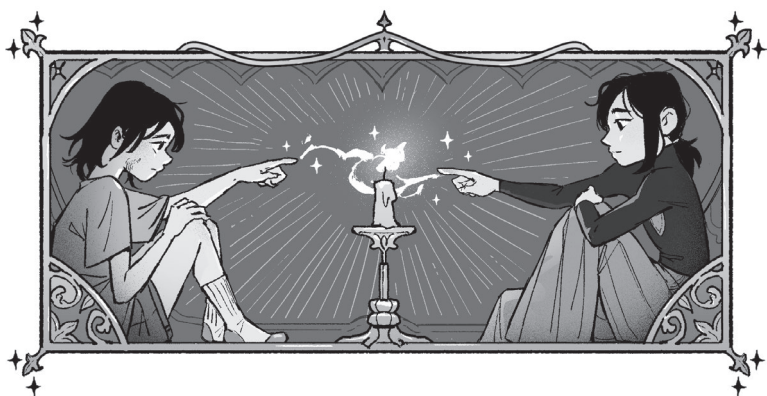


PUFFIN BOOKS

THE
MISSING MAGIC
OF SPARROW
XIA

1

UNIVERSAL AGREEMENTS



It was a universal agreement, that is, *anyone* could agree: Magic is better than the mundane. It was a fact so obvious, so agreed-upon, that twelve-year-old Sparrow Xia paid little attention to her mother's lecture on The Importance of Magic, and the accompanying sub-lecture of Sparrow-would-you-*please*-work-hard-this-year-and-stop-worrying-your-mother. Sparrow *knew* all this, but she'd heard the same words over and over again since the beginning of the year. She just wanted to wait for breakfast without being grilled about her future.

Her mother paused mid-scold and fiddled with the kitchen lighter—the runes printed onto it had all but rubbed away, its sigils

barely visible. As magical contraptions went, it was as clunky as it was useless.

“This old thing never works—” Her mother tapped it sharply on the counter. It spat out a few feeble sparks, too weak to light the stove.

Sparrow refrained from suggesting that Ma get a new one. The last thing she needed was another lecture on how contraptions these days cost too much money, and how money doesn’t grow on trees.

“I’ll get it,” Sparrow said, sighing and approaching the stove. She hovered one hand over the stove as the other turned the gas dial. Heat danced throughout her body, further warming her up in the already sweltering kitchen. This close to midsummer, their home in South Emberland was a veritable oven.

Whumph. Fire, orange-red and cheerful, ignited on the range. Sparrow grinned. No matter how many times she lit the stove with her magic, it never got old. Being a fire mage had its perks, the best of which was the ability to heat her bathwater to perfect, near-scalding temperatures.



“See? I’ve been practicing,” Sparrow said, wriggling her fingers and making little sparks at her fingertips.

“I hope you have, Ruyan,” said her mother, who only used Sparrow’s Chinese name when she was feeling particularly exasperated. She pushed past Sparrow,

shooing her back to her seat. Soon, the sound of sizzling oil filled the kitchen as her mother began cooking.

“You have to take this seriously. You don’t have much time! You know you—”

“—only have one chance,” Sparrow parroted dully, the joy of successfully lighting the stove fading. “I know, Ma . . . You don’t have to remind me that my magic’s gonna disappear. I’m aware.” *Painfully so.* “But it’s not fair!”

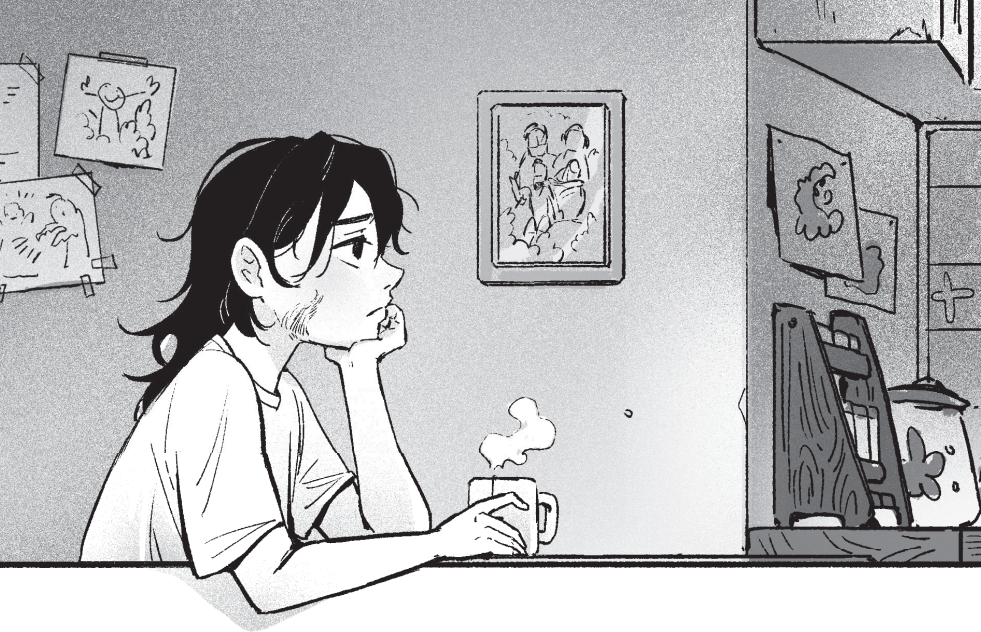
Sparrow fell silent, sullen. The thought of waking up one day and being unable to spark fire at her fingertips or having to take tepid baths sounded horrible. Losing her fire would mean losing a part of herself. Would she even be the same person without magic?

“Don’t be childish, Sparrow. It’s just the way things are. Adults don’t have magic and children do. Everyone loses their magic. It’s part of growing up.” Her mother tutted at her and continued, “Work hard at Zenith Academy this year and make the most of your magic while you have it.”

Sparrow’s stomach lurched with a mix of terror and excitement.

Zenith Academy for Magical Development. One of the top three mage academies in the United Realms, far to the northeast. From tomorrow, Sparrow would be an apprentice there, living and breathing magic, and learning how to get as strong as possible while fire magic still hummed in her blood.





“I just want you to have a better life than I do,” continued her mother. “I didn’t do well in school, and look at me now. Do you want a life like mine? Waking at dawn every day? Do well at Zenith, and you can get into a good guild. One with lots of benefits!”

No, I don’t, Sparrow thought guiltily. She loved her mother, and the bread and pastries from the guild bakery, but everything about her mother and their home life seemed hopelessly mundane. Ma had signed away her magical years to the local baker’s guild only to become a magicless adult stuck in a banal cycle of baking bread, mopping floors, and, *ugh*, doing the dishes. Sure, baking was a job, but Sparrow wanted something . . . more.

“You have so much potential. If only you behaved more like your brother—”

“Ma, *please*,” Sparrow groaned. No lecture about her future was complete without being compared to her perfect older brother,



Ainsley. Her mother gave her a put-upon look, as though somehow Sparrow had managed to hurt *her* feelings.

“Go get ready, then,” Ma said, pinching the bridge of her nose. “We have to leave right after breakfast. We can’t be late for the Luneport to Zenith.”



Sparrow padded up the stairs, eager for the peace of her room. The thought of living away from home was enough to twist her stomach into knots, even without her fears about making friends or passing the notoriously difficult Evaluation exams. Distracted by her worries, she forgot to skip the creakiest floorboard on the landing. She froze.

Please tell me he didn’t hear that, Sparrow thought with the fervency of prayer.

“Hey, birdbrain!”

Sparrow groaned. Ainsley appeared in his doorway, already in his Zenith uniform: a high-necked, long-sleeved black shirt embroidered with the Academy crest, and wide pleated pants cut in a pale gray-blue cloth. A gold pin shone on his collar—he'd been appointed an Adept this year, a teacher's special assistant. *As though his head needed help getting any bigger*, Sparrow thought.

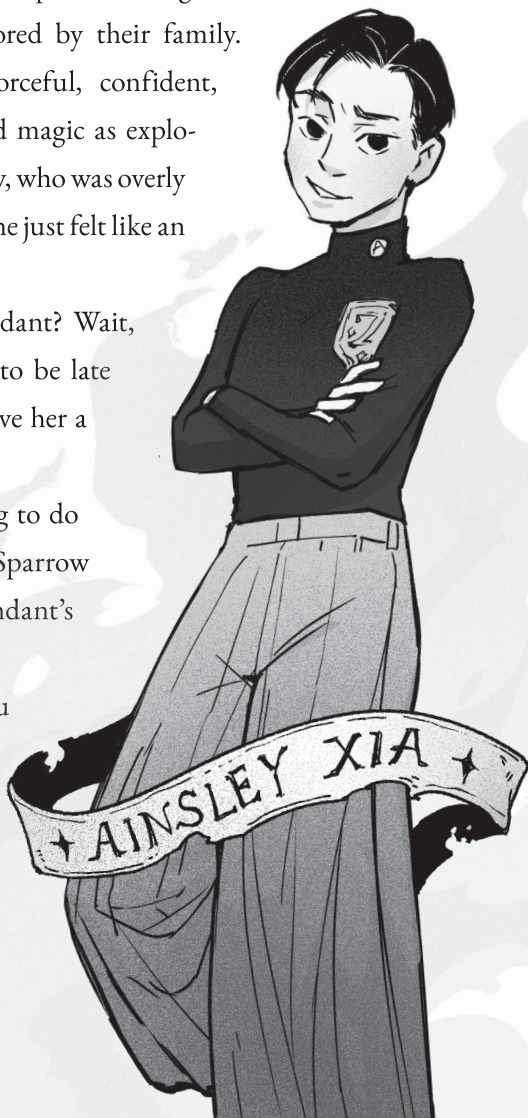
Ainsley was already adored by their family. The perfect fire mage: forceful, confident, stubborn; his emotions and magic as explosive as an oil fire. To Sparrow, who was overly cautious about everything, he just felt like an insufferable bully.

"Have you seen my pendant? Wait, changed yet? I don't want to be late because of you." Ainsley gave her a disapproving once-over.

"That's what I was going to do before you accosted me," Sparrow said irritably. "And your pendant's on the couch."

"Then why didn't you grab it on your way up?"

"It's your pendant; get it yourself! You're the one who told me touch it!"



Her brother scowled at her, meaning that Sparrow was right, and he didn't like it. After a beat, a smug look returned to his face.

"You're not going to make any friends with that attitude. Do you know how critical the people at Zenith are? At least *try* and be nice, although even that might not work . . . One look at your face and they'll know something's wrong with you."

Ainsley stomped down the stairs, snickering to himself. Stung, Sparrow untucked her hair from behind her ear, covering the patch of discolored, mottled skin that swooshed up her jaw and cheek. She usually hid the scar—fire mages were supposed to be immune to fire. A burn was like a sign hanging over her that read: NOT A PROPER FIRE MAGE.

Compared to Ainsley, Sparrow felt like that awful kitchen lighter that barely worked. Most days, her fire burned barely brighter than a match flame, more suited to the family's ancestral altar than in a young mage's hands. *Psychological pressure*, the local Healer had said. *A lack of qi*, the Chinese medicine person her mother went to said. Whatever it was, it was clear that something was wrong with her.

It felt shallow to admit, but Sparrow wanted to be special. She didn't want her remaining magical years to be spent being compared unfavorably to her brother, or being avoided like the plague just because her magic was weak. She wanted to be treated the way Ainsley was—admired, respected. Loved.

Maybe, just maybe, Zenith Academy would be the answer to all her problems. Living away from home was scary, but maybe she

could finally make a friend or two, and there wouldn't be daily lectures about how she wasn't trying hard enough. And surely they would have all sorts of experts on how to make her magic stronger.

The thought buoyed her spirits as she entered her room and changed into her uniform. Leaning close to her mirror, she adjusted her hair to cover the rubbery skin on her cheek. If she tilted her head a little, she couldn't see the scar at all.

Things are going to be different after I start at Zenith, she thought determinedly, gazing at her reflection. She'd say goodbye to this mundane house and her mundane self and become the kind of fire mage she was supposed to be.

A knock interrupted her dramatic moment.

"Hey, birdbrain, Ma says breakfast's ready," Ainsley drawled from the hallway. "Stop checking yourself in the mirror and hurry down."



2

LUNEPORT TRAVEL

The table was overladen with a mouthwatering assortment of rice, congee, eggs, and lightly fried slices of bacon as toppers. Nainai, Sparrow's grandmother, was already seated at the head of the table, and Sparrow and Ainsley took their seats under her silvery gaze.

Nainai was *ancient*, and as mean as she was old. She'd never gotten used to losing her magic, and Sparrow often noticed her making aborted hand gestures, as though to call on magic that was no longer there. While other grandmothers did yoga or baked pies, Nainai spent her time reminiscing about better, magical days with a vacant look in her eyes.

"Girl." Nainai fixed her unwavering stare on Sparrow. "Work hard at school."

"I will, Nainai."

"You don't want to end up like your cousin Diana," Nainai continued, her voice taking on a mocking edge.

"Cousin Diana is nice!" Sparrow blurted out. She was the only one in their family who *didn't* act like Sparrow was a freak of nature.

Ainsley rolled his eyes and muttered, "Typical birdbrain, just *has* to argue . . ." under his breath.



"She works at a third-branch janitorial guild." Nainai sniffed. "How nice she is doesn't matter."

Sparrow's retort was interrupted when her mother set a steaming jug of soy milk on the table with a *thud*.

"She is nice," her mother said, pursing her lips at Nainai. "But it *is* true she doesn't have any prospects. You should both be careful not to end up like her. Sparrow, don't talk back to your grandmother, and eat."

Ainsley, ever dedicated to his role as the goody two-shoes of the family, made a show of nodding in agreement and helping himself to breakfast.

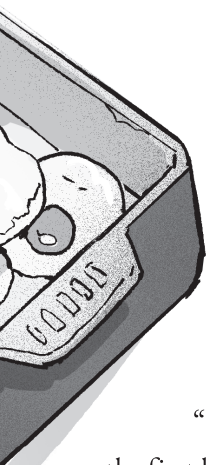
"Of course, Ma. When I graduate, I'll join the very best of the first-branch guilds . . . the White Lily, just like Master Rowan," he declared around a spoonful of bacon.

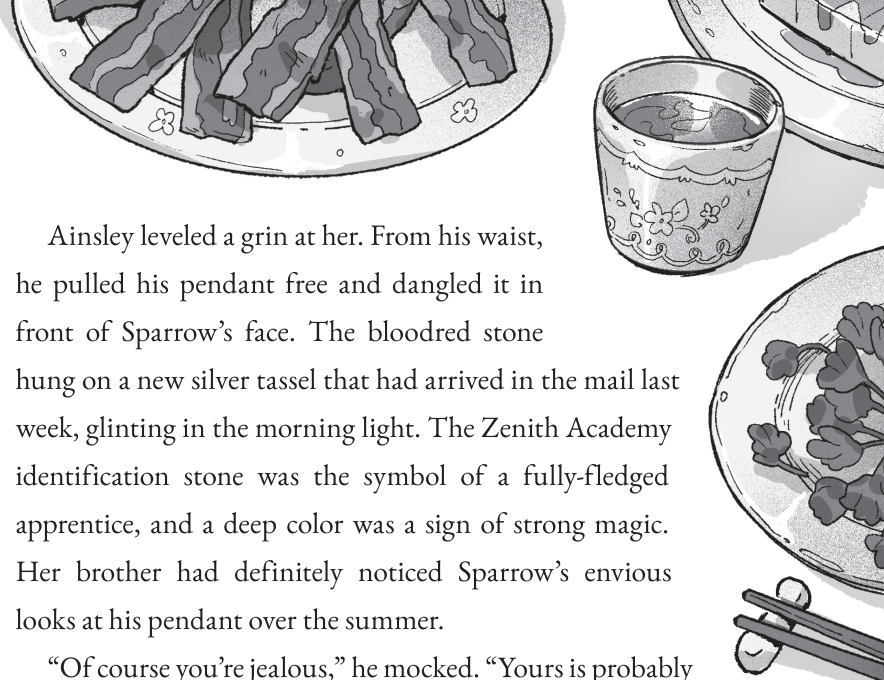
"Imagine my son, a Healer!" Ma beamed and patted Ainsley affectionately on the head before continuing to putter about the kitchen. Sparrow rolled her eyes.

"Maybe this Master Rowan could adopt you. Then we wouldn't have to hear you talk about him all the time," she sniped.

"You're just jealous."

"Me? Jealous of you? Gross."



An illustration in the top right corner shows a plate with food, possibly dumplings or small buns, and a glass of water with a floral pattern. The glass is partially filled with water.

Ainsley leveled a grin at her. From his waist, he pulled his pendant free and dangled it in front of Sparrow's face. The bloodred stone hung on a new silver tassel that had arrived in the mail last week, glinting in the morning light. The Zenith Academy identification stone was the symbol of a fully-fledged apprentice, and a deep color was a sign of strong magic. Her brother had definitely noticed Sparrow's envious looks at his pendant over the summer.

"Of course you're jealous," he mocked. "Yours is probably going to be transparent."

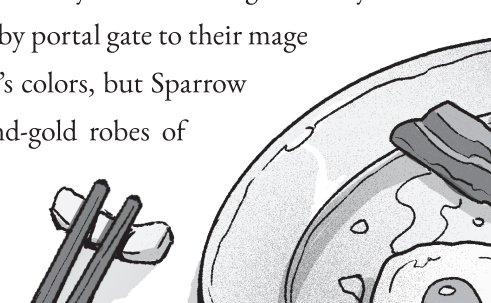
"Stop arguing with your brother, Sparrow," said Ma with a click of her tongue. "We have to go soon!"

Sparrow held back her frustration and turned to her breakfast, piling her bowl high with food.

Just you wait, Ainsley, she thought mutinously as she chewed.



After a forty-minute journey full of bickering, Sparrow and Ainsley were hurried through the South Emberland City Luneport, a shiny silver building currently full of apprentices ready to travel by portal gate to their mage academies. Many were in Zenith's colors, but Sparrow spied some kids in the white-and-gold robes of

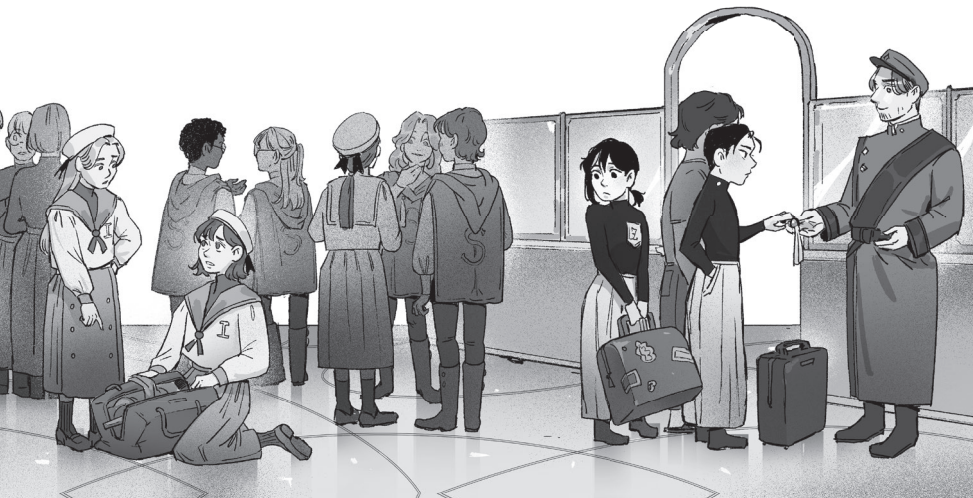
An illustration in the bottom right corner shows a pair of chopsticks resting on a plate. The plate has some food on it, including what looks like a piece of meat or a vegetable.

Inselberg Institute as well as the all-green outfits of Spire Hall.

They passed a poor Inselberg apprentice whose bags had split open at the zipper and reached an attendant in the deep purple uniform of the Transportation Guild. Sparrow handed over the ticket that had arrived with her acceptance letter, and Ainsley handed over his identification pendant to be scanned.



“Zenith Academy is practically at the opposite end of the United Realms,” the attendant remarked as he took their larger bags and set them on the carousel, which ferried them out of sight. “You must be conflicted, ma’am.”

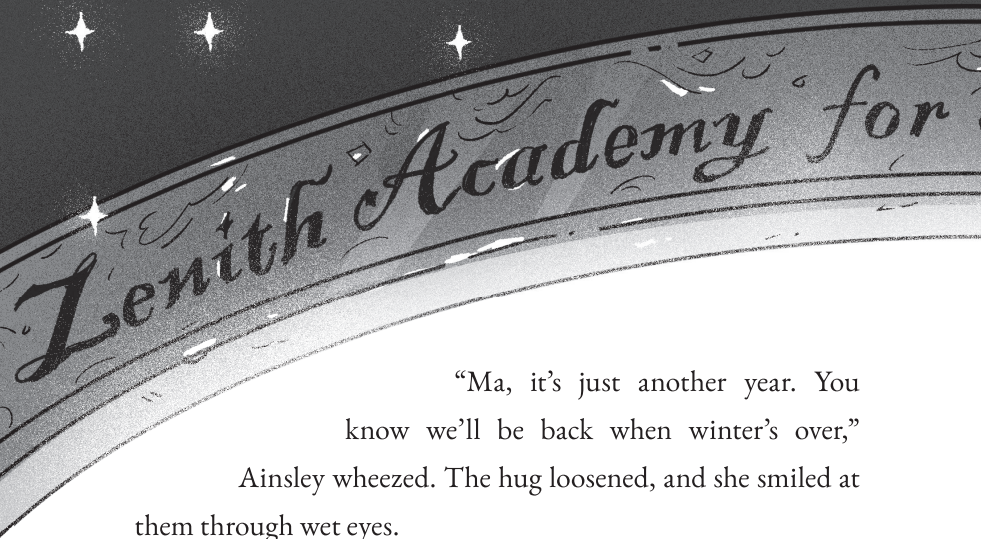


“Their education is the most important thing,” their mother replied in what Sparrow privately called Ma’s “business voice.”

“Of course.” The attendant handed back Sparrow’s stamped ticket and Ainsley’s pendant. “Your luggage will be sent ahead to the Academy. You two may proceed past me to the Zenith Academy Luneport, but you’ll have to stay behind, ma’am. I’ll give you a moment to say goodbye.”

Sparrow found herself squashed up against her brother in a suffocating hug.





“Ma, it’s just another year. You know we’ll be back when winter’s over,” Ainsley wheezed. The hug loosened, and she smiled at them through wet eyes.

“You know I worry. I packed some buns for you both if you get hungry. I want you to look out for each other. Ainsley, take care of your sister, okay? Promise me?”

“I can take care of myself,” Sparrow grumbled.

“Hush, Sparrow, just listen to me, and listen to your teachers. Make sure to work hard, okay?”

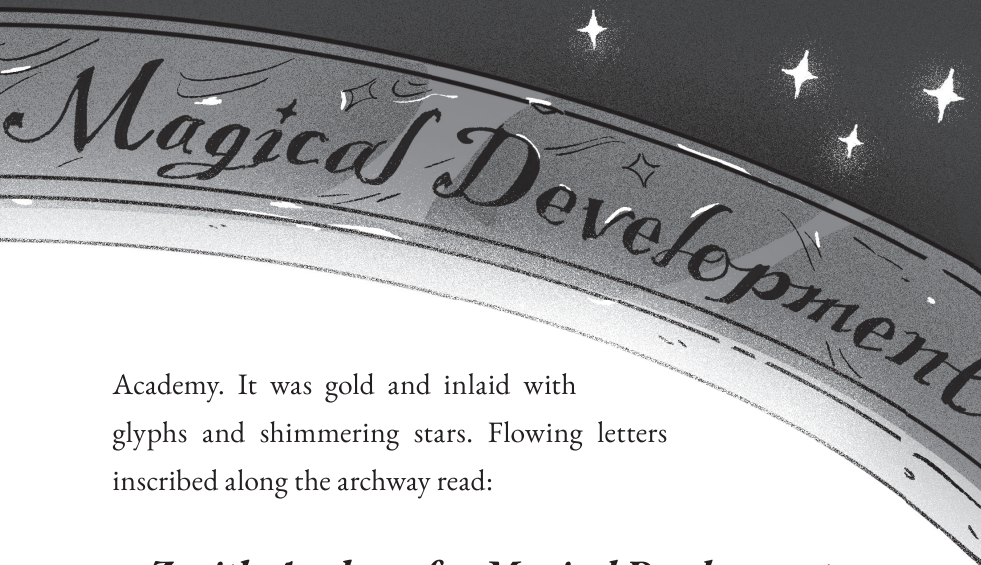
She extracted a dozen more promises before the attendant cleared his throat.

“They’ll be late at this rate, ma’am,” he said apologetically, proffering a pack of tissues.

Sparrow turned back for one final wave and let herself be led along by Ainsley down a hall lined with circular gateways.

“Walk faster, birdbrain. The one to Zenith is all the way at the end.”

Ainsley wasn’t kidding. They passed by what felt like every other gate in the Luneport before reaching the one to Zenith



Academy. It was gold and inlaid with glyphs and shimmering stars. Flowing letters inscribed along the archway read:

***Zenith Academy for Magical Development
Reaching the Highest Peak***

Sparrow tried not to fidget. So much depended on her doing well at Zenith, but what if she messed up?

“Hey, Ainsley?” Sparrow hated how meek and uncertain she sounded. “What was it like for you? As a first-year, I mean? Was it scary?”

“A little,” he answered with a shrug. “You want some advice?”

Sparrow nodded, surprised. She couldn’t imagine perfect, composed Ainsley being scared at all.

“You have to be willing to do whatever it takes. But who knows if you’ll be able to pull it off with that teeny tiny fire of yours,” Ainsley replied, smirking once more when Sparrow’s attentive expression morphed into annoyance.

“And here I was thinking that you were being nice, for once.”

“Oh, come on, you’re always so sensitive—”

“Attention, all travelers to Zenith Academy. The Luneport gate will be opening momentarily. Please line up in an orderly fashion.”

It was time. A silvery light began to glow at the edges of the gate. The surface, which Sparrow had thought to be a velvety black cloth, shifted like smoke, lightening into a silvery circle that reminded Sparrow of a full moon on a foggy night.

The gate to Zenith Academy was open.

It was now or never. Years of living with a fire that burned too small within her. One moment, suspended through a portal, to reach the rest of her life.

She took a deep, calming breath. In and out. Sparrow gathered her courage and stepped through the gate, feeling cold, unfamiliar magic wash over her. It felt like she was walking against a great wall of fabric. In between one breath and the next, her feet left the South Emberland Luneport and landed on the flagstones of Zenith Academy.